

# Meeting industry 'hanging in there'

By **MIKE GORRELL**

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After two bad years, Utah's meeting industry is looking at 2011 as a year to "hang in there, hope for the best and to keep moving forward."

That assessment by Michelle Bruno of Bruno Group Signature Events, a Salt Lake City company, which has provided conference and exhibition services since 1994, summed up the observations of several Wasatch Front convention officials Tuesday during a panel discussion organized by Meeting Planners International.

From conversations with people in various aspects of the meeting industry, Bruno said "no one is predicting they're

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going backward.” That’s not completely good news, she added, noting “it’s great to say there’s nowhere to go but up. But in our world, that’s the case.”

Bruno said business prospects look best for meeting facilities catering to high-end corporate customers, a market helped by the opening in the past couple of years of the luxurious Waldorf-Astoria, St. Regis and Montage hotels in the Park City-area. That business could increase almost 20 percent over 2010’s slightly-better-than-dismal

performance, enough growth that it could trickle down to upper middle-end properties. Still, the pared-back tenor of most meetings means service companies dependent on the corporate-meeting market will not be able to expand their operations significantly.

“They will have to put their nose to the grindstone with their existing staff and resources,” she said.

She predicted larger conventions will attract 7 percent more delegates to Utah this year than in 2010, filling 16 percent more hotel rooms, but added that “it will take three to four years to get [that sector] back to 2005-07 levels.”

Bill Malone, president and

CEO of the Park City Chamber/Bureau, said the buzz surrounding the openings of the three luxury hotels has boosted Summit County’s attractiveness to leisure travelers, as well as to meeting groups.

“We’re going to ride that for a while,” he said, while continuing to look at providing more publicly owned meeting facilities, given that the luxury hotels dedicate more space to spas than meeting rooms.

Visit Salt Lake President Scott Beck said his organization went into 2010 figuring it would be worse than 2009, but was pleasantly surprised when it wasn’t. This coming year looks better, he said,

citing sizable increases in room-night bookings.

Utah County is in a state of transition, said Convention & Visitors Bureau CEO Joel Racker.

Ground was broken this year on a \$38 million convention center in downtown Provo, a facility that would have cost closer to \$60 million before the downturn lowered construction costs.

Until it opens in March 2012, however, Racker said his bureau will work to attract more small monthly meetings and to get additional liquor licenses to expand Utah County’s bar and restaurant scene.

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